# MR. FANTASTIC, SUPERDUPER STAR

ALEC HANLEY BEMIS (HTTPS://WWW.LAWEEKLY.COM/GUEST-AUTHOR/ALEC-HANLEY-BEMIS/) JUNE 5, 2003

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“Dude, what’s up? It’s Mr. Fantastic! Yeah, fuck you too. Dude . . . Sorry, I don’t even know if I was allowed to say that word. Let me rewind that. Yeah, beep you too. Was that better? Cool. Give me a call back. Of course, it’s now the day after I originally called you. It’s now Wednesday. It’s like 12:01 according to my car clock. And because it is my car clock it is the most important car clock in the world, and therefore that time is correct. So no matter what your little answering machine says — 11:55, 12:15 — it’s 12:01. I said it is, therefore it goes, because I am, to you, the most important person in the world. I am to everybody that knows me and soon to be to the rest of America and soon to be to the rest of the world the most important person in the world, because, with your help, I’m not only going to be a star. I’m not just going to be a superstar. I am on the verge of being the rst ever superduper star.”

There was a pause on my answering machine, and then Chris Jackson continued: “I just fuckin’ demolished a tumbleweed going about 106 on the freeway. I hope that didn’t fuck up my car. And if it did, I’m suing you ’cause it’s all your fucking fault. Okay, Jesus, keep it real.”

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There are a couple of things you should know about Chris Jackson. Though he looks no older than 15 or 16 years old, he just turned 22. Until recently, he lived with his parents. His dad xes video games for a living, and his mother does “something involving tax preparation.” Neither of them received an education beyond high school. They live small lives but are relatively happy, perhaps a bit scared of other people. Chris has spent most of his 22 years stranded in the Inland Empire city of Upland, which expands like forever to the east of Los Angeles. If you drive along the barren stretches of this bedroom community long enough, you begin to forget that there’s such a thing as a horizon. This can be taken literally or metaphorically. Chris, for example, has rarely ventured past the boundaries of his hometown. In ’91 or ’92 his family went on a road trip to Nevada and Washington, but he hasn’t left California in the past decade. “Have you ever been to San Diego?” I asked. “I’ve been to Sea World,” he replied.

Another thing you should know about Chris is that he is literally a 90-pound weakling. His arms are so thin you can articulate every bone and every joint. The meat, the muscle, and the freckled esh that covers those bones seem almost an afterthought. He’s claimed to be 5 feet 8 inches tall, but that’s debatable. “At the moment I weigh 92 pounds,” he told me once, “and, at most, I’ve gotten up to a buck-oh- ve.” When you meet Chris’ gaze close-up, he has what looks like the beginning of crow’s-feet at the corners of his young eyes. One is tempted to call him fragile.

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Chris, though, is a 90-pound weakling who would make Charles Atlas proud. What makes his size and weight notable is that he is an enthusiastic participant in the strange pastime that has exploded across suburban America over the past couple of years — backyard wrestling. The young men who do it dress up in out ts worthy of their professional analogues in the WWE (World Wrestling Entertainment, formerly WWF) and perform as characters of their own invention. Some of the kids Chris has associated with go by names like Scorpio Sky, Youth Suicide, Super Chunty and Ryan Rage. Chris, of course, is Mr. Fantastic.

As in the WWE, backyard matches are staged and highly theatrical. There is blading (self-cutting the forehead to produce dramatic spurts of blood), there are good guys and bad guys, and props with which to bash the competition. Only the backyarders are a bit more creative. In addition to wielding the folding metal chairs and ladders used in the professional rings, they utilize an array of less familiar tools — uorescent-light tubes, aming baseball bats wrapped in barbed wire, thumbtacks.

The idea for these accessories came from smaller professional federations like the now-defunct ECW (Extreme Championship Wrestling) and the still-extant XPW (Xtreme Pro Wrestling). Many of the kids are dedicated a cionados of pro wrestling's more underground strains. Essentially, they are geeks playing out the fantasies of a hardcore fan. As Spock look-alikes are to a Star Trek convention, they are to simulated combat. Unlike a Trekkie convention, though, backyard wrestling matches can get bloody.

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Consequently, there has been a predictable media response: segments on 20/20, the cover of USA Today and angry editorials in local newspapers, special reports on MTV, and even a series of exploitative, Girls Gone Wild–style videos advertised on late-night television. All of them play up backyard wrestling's violence, and most miss out on its lighter side. If the kids are ambitious and intelligent — as Chris and his cohorts are — backyard wrestling can be funny, less like Fight Club than a summer-stock production with questionable special e ects and a crew of daring but slightly inept stuntmen.

"I do it for the love of entertaining people," said Chris. "And I do it to see if I can walk away from it. One time I fell 13 feet onto concrete, and, you know, I walked away from it. It took two or three days to walk correctly, but . . .

"It's also the shock value," he added. "It's watching people stand in front of the TV watching [videos of] poor, little, defenseless, 90-pound me fall 13 feet onto straight concrete. But the main reason I do the things that I do is the love. You know, I will literally go out there and talk shit to a 6-foot-3-inch, 350-pound guy just to see smiles and laughter coming from the crowd."

The transforming e ect of celebrity — no matter how minor — is a powerful lure for kids like Chris: sheltered, suburban and a little bit ridiculous. Their very surroundings discourage them from thinking any big thoughts other than those revolving around the television. Fame may be the only metaphor they have for understanding the world, the magical device through which they might transpose their small lives onto the larger grid of public consciousness. Chris is emblematic: In spite of the logical progression an outsider might draw — dead-end job, dead-end life — he tries his darnedest to grasp the prospect of fame in little ways, every day. One day, he hopes, the reality of Chris Jackson might disappear, to be replaced by the ction of Mr. Fantastic.

MALL WORLD

I rst met Chris at the Ontario Mills Mall, one of a half-dozen football- eld-size shopping centers that pop up as you approach Upland on Interstate 10. Ontario Mills is so large it is broken into "neighborhoods." As I entered the complex, a recorded voice on the public-address system announced: "You are passing through entry 10 into neighborhood 10." The message repeated in Spanish and what sounded like Korean. Just inside the sliding doors was a great knobby tree

made of berglass, and within its leaves were large swaying butter ies, a giant caterpillar wearing a construction helmet, and enormous grapes that looked like soap bubbles. The voice continued: “Pick up a free coupon book with over one hundred dollars’ worth of savings at our information booth in neighborhood 8.” That meant great deals at stores like Tiny Tiny Computers, the Glamour 2000 frame shop, and The Cutting Edge, with its unparalleled selection of beer steins, bowie knives, wine-bottle openers and leather-sheathed Jack Daniel’s asks.

Chris was employed by the Pro Wrestling Shop. The more marginal vendors at the Ontario Mills Mall — E-Z Bonsai, Fancy Belts — made do with small pushcarts strewn about the oor. The Pro Wrestling Shop was one of them. Positioned between an Old Navy store and an accessories boutique called The Icing, it was packed with T-shirts, books and videotapes — mostly featuring mainstream WWE talent like Stone Cold Steve Austin, Olympic gold medalist–cum–pro Kurt Angle, and the ash-complexioned Undertaker. It also sold some soft porn starring the pneumatic female counterparts that have grown ever more prominent in the WWE. One video was titled Divas in Hedonism.

Chris was sitting on a stool in front of the cart’s register shooting the shit with Eric Guzman, a lumpy, rough-looking kid born to Mexican-immigrant parents. The two were friends from high school, co-workers at the Pro Wrestling Shop and fellow backyarders — Eric goes by the name Hardcore Jack. Both of them were swimming in the suburban-teen mall workers’ uniform of choice: oversize polo shirts and clunky black combat boots. When I approached, they stopped talking. Chris and I walked over to the food court and sat down beneath a giant berglass hot dog.

As he envisioned it, I had come to conduct a “shoot,” as de ned in a catalog back at the Pro Wrestling Shop: “Take someone in the wrestling biz, sit them down and have them tell the truth about everything they’ve experienced in their career both in and out of the ring. This isn’t an interview with a wrestling character, these are the thoughts and stories of the man behind the persona. This is as real as it gets.” This article, then, would be Mr. Fantastic’s autobiography. So how, exactly, did Chris Jackson’s backyard-wrestling story begin?

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“I rst got interested in wrestling through family,” he said, straining over the mall’s ever-present soundtrack of dance-pop and lite FM. “When we were young, pretty much everybody liked it, but as I got older, that group of everybody got smaller and smaller. It was in junior high when it ‰ wasn’t really, you know, ‘popular’” (Chris made air quotes). “At this point it was like 10 or 20 people at the most that were still into wrestling. Somehow you nd those people. You come across somebody that likes it. They know someone that likes wrestling, and you know someone that likes wrestling, so you all start hanging out during lunch, hanging out after school, and for whatever reason you get talking. ‘Yadda yadda yadda. Hey, why don’t we have an event of our own?’ We started doing it as part of a high school project. I was in graphic-arts class, and our nal was to make a ve-minute video of basically anything. Me and Eric got six, seven, eight, probably like 10 friends together, and just wrestled.”

They gave themselves names — one of the kids came as Jewberg, a character closely tailored after a popular World Championship Wrestling champion named Goldberg — and called their “federation” Upland Hardcore Wrestling, or the

UHW. After the school project was handed in and done, they just kept on doing it.

Chris laid out the essentials: “Spare tires. Spread two layers of tires, about 25 in each layer. Put some plywood on top, then lay down some carpet and some little foam pads, maybe a few pillows, whatever. Put a tarp over it. Cement wooden posts into the ground and wrap some ropes around it, and that’s basically about it. What makes backyard wrestling is the violence. It’s the light tubes, it’s the glass, it’s the thumbtacks, it’s the re.”

What Chris and his friends were up to was much more than a local phenomenon. At the time they were staging their matches, backyard wrestling was widespread enough that it began to get national media attention. Much of the coverage focused on the scene in Southern California. The articles only fueled the kids’ interest — and ambitions.

In 1999, 20/20 ran a story largely focused on the exploits of Ventura County’s Andre “Youth Suicide” Verdun, a muscular blond with a quick manner and a predilection for self-in icted violence. With his media bona des in place, Verdun became a leader and inspiration to Chris and his friends. Teenagers from Ventura, San Bernardino, Orange County and the Inland Empire began wrestling each other in ad hoc federations with names like the SCWA (Southern California Wrestling Alliance), the RWF (Real Wrestling Federation) and the EEW (Evil Empire Wrestling).

That’s when things got interesting. Chris and his UHW friends began to think of their activities as the equivalent of the minor leagues. Backyard wrestling became more than a class project, more than an after-school activity, more than a hobby. It became a kind of pseudo-career, a way of life. Or a way out of life.

Chris had to get back to work, so we strolled through the mall. Free- oating TV monitors ashed images of skateboarding teens and advertisements for a video called Spray: An Adventure in Waterboarding. A promotional poster for Ontario Mills featured a modi ed image of a diapered baby lifting a barbell. “What is it about the shopping and entertainment at The Mills that changes people’s lives for the better?” it asked. The answer: “We call it . . . THE MILLS EFFECT.

Back at the Pro Wrestling Shop, Chris showed me their selection of videotapes. There was a surfeit of material by or about Mick “Mankind” Foley, a Rocky-like “people’s champion” and backyard wrestling’s greatest inspiration. In 1998 the WWE broadcast the Dude Love tapes, which documented amateur matches Foley staged with friends while attending college in upstate New York. In the rst of his two best-selling autobiographies, Have a Nice Day!, Foley discusses his rst impulse to make the tapes, after he’d broken up with a girlfriend: “I decided to handle this problem the way I handled the all-important events in my life. ‘Get the camera, let’s document this thing . . .’ In much the same way I would react when my ear was torn o in Germany, I wanted visual proof of the important events in my life.”

“People are pretty sick,” Chris said, his tone uttering between admiration and disgust. “The number-one question I get

is, ‘You guys got that event where Owen Hart falls 50 feet and dies?” (Owen was the youngest member of the Hart family wrestling dynasty. In 1999, during a pay-per-view event in Kansas City, Hart fell to his death while preparing to enter the ring on a cable.) “Sometimes I make ’em feel like real assholes. I mean, why would you want to see that?”

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Of course, anyone who’s ever pondered the possibility of televised executions could answer the question. I pointed out to Chris that he’d been sprained, bloodied and beaten in the ring — even if it was with his consent, even though much of the action was pre-scripted, where did the line lie between acceptable and unacceptable violence?

“It’s if I can do it and walk away from it,” he said, ri ng on his earlier comments like a well-rehearsed pro. “There’s a point where there’s no way any human can survive. You could die. You could be crippled. You could be stuck in a wheelchair for the rest of your life. When it gets to that point I’m just like, nahh, I don’t think I’m going to take that.”

When I asked him about his worst injuries, Chris didn’t cite the match documented in the photo on the cover, the image of his angel face covered in what the wrestling trade refers to as a “crimson mask.” That was merely cosmetic damage. Instead, Chris mentioned a match where he got a concussion and a bruised or broken rib. (He isn’t sure which. He rarely seeks out a doctor’s opinion.)

“The funny thing is, when I sprain stu , I don’t sprain just one thing,” he said. “Once I had a guy throw me across the ring, I landed weird, and I sprained from here to here.” He indicates the length of his body, from shoulder to knee. “I made a tape, and you can actually see my elbow go in and out.”

Chris reached into his backpack and pulled out two VHS cassettes — one with a computer-generated label that said, “Best of Mr. Fantastic,” the other with a hand-scrawled label that read, “Best of Backyard Wrestling, Vol. 1.”

“It’s not on there,” he said. “It’s on my ‘Whatta Man’ video. Me as a 16-year-old to ‘Whatta Man’” — the song by Salt’n’Pepa:

My man is smooth like Barry, and his voice got bass
A body like Arnold with a Denzel face
What a man, what a man, what a man
What a mighty good man

HERE COMES GREATNE

For more than two years, lmmaker Matt Luem and his partner Greg Fiering followed Chris Jackson and his friends for

an extensive documentary project called Here ‰ Comes Greatness. Luem and Fiering discovered the kids the same way many of the kids found out about each other: on the Internet via a Web site for the Backyard Wrestling Association. Curiosity soon bloomed into full-blown obsession: Luem claims to have 2,500 negatives and 140 hours of footage; Fiering has created a 600-page transcript of dialogue from the videotapes. They probably qualify as the phenomenon's reigning experts.

I caught up with Luem at a Santa Monica editing facility where we viewed some of the best incidents he and Fiering had caught on tape: Andre "Youth Suicide" Verdun touching dollar bills to his bloody forehead and handing them out as souvenirs; Verdun attending to a friend's head wound by Super Glue–ing it shut; Ryan Rage poised to jump o a rooftop holding a championship belt made of cardboard and tin over his head. In one clip, a dusky Latino boy named Eric Trejo is dressed as a masked, lucha libre–style wrestler with a safety-orange baseball cap. His name, Super Chunty, is a play on a typical ethnic slur.

"I actually see a lot of racial unity in backyard wrestling," Luem said as he nished with the highlights. "Here in California a lot of this is happening in very mixed neighborhoods, very ethnic neighborhoods. There aren't a lot of kids who will assume other ethnic identities when they're wrestling, but it has happened." Another of Eric Trejo's characters, Luem told me, was named Tasteless Tony 80s. He was a white kid from the '80s who thought he was a black kid in the '90s. It was a roundabout send-up of "wiggers" — suburban white kids hooked on rap music and black urban culture. ‰

"You certainly can't do something like that in sports or even necessarily in theater unless you're writing the plays," Luem said. "I think a kid like Chris Jackson is just incredibly bright. If it wasn't for this kind of phenomenon, I don't know if he would have ever found an outlet for his creative performance side. In some strange way, wrestling works for him. He can create this character and then use the qualities of that character — the toughness he's learned, the irreverence — and he can use those qualities to inform his normal life."

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Luem's background is in punk rock, and he feels a certain a nity between his own passions and those of the backyarders. "The kids are not violence junkies," he said. "They are adrenaline junkies. They don't want to hurt each other. In fact, a lot of them have said to me it's much better to actually be on the receiving end of the blow. Why? Well, think about it: Why would you stand in the front row of a punk rock concert without earplugs when they have those huge speakers? That could be interpreted as a pretty violent experience, but in fact it's more about the rush of that moment, and the adrenaline you experience as a witness or a participant — if there's any di erence. At punk concerts most of the people watching the bands were in bands themselves. When I went to backyard-wrestling shows, it was usually just other wrestlers.

"What these kids have is a desire to be something that they're not," Luem continued. "They want to re-create themselves, particularly at the age when most of them start. They are at that period in their lives where they are thrashing through adolescence and trying to gure out who they are. Physically, they're changing. Mentally, they're

changing. Their home lives might be unstable. It's almost like they have inherited this idea of the mutable personality from day one. I call them the post–Mick Foley, post-Madonna generation. When I was growing up, I never thought of just reinventing myself, taking a totally di erent name and re-imagining myself. Even if I did, I never would have had a place to go with that name. I think the wrestling provides them with a stage for that persona."

I asked Luem about the kids' incessant videotaping. "It's a form of journaling," he said. "They are journaling their way through adolescence. It is a process that builds some self-awareness. Through backyard wrestling, their lives start to tell a story, and conversely, they use their characters to tell a story about their lives. Previously, these kids didn't have any narrative that made any sense to them, and they took control of that. They bring in humiliation and redemption. They bring in triumph and defeat. They bring in all these kind of mythic processes and then apply them to their lives. I think that's one of the most amazing things about it."

Luem stopped. "Let me ask you," he said. "Do you feel like your life tells a story?"

XSANITY VS. SCHIZ

L ast spring, Chris had a match in a semipro wrestling event at the Disney GOALS (Growth Opportunities through Athletics, Learning, and Service) ice rink in Anaheim. The rink abuts the Anaheim Marketplace, "Orange County's Largest Indoor Swapmeet," an establishment mostly frequented by the area's large immigrant population. The ring, behind the swap meet at the center of a large steel cage, was lit by spotlight and streetlight and bounded by a blue ring of rotten wood. Small billboards advertised Bilt Rite Trucks and Zamboni.com. The kids had rented the ring for the night for $500 and were charging $20 a head, but few of the spectators seemed to be paying.

Eric Guzman, Chris' friend from the Pro Wrestling Shop, greeted me at the entrance wearing a hooded sweatshirt promoting the nü-metal band the Deftones. "The talent is supposed to be here early, but they're way late," he said, exasperated and apologetic. His hair was long, frizzy and black, his skin touched by acne, his Doc Martens half-unlaced. He claimed to have been a wrestling fan since the age of 4. "I don't just watch WWE," he said. "I watch everything. Mexican wrestling, Japanese, everything."

To the eyes of an outsider, the scene inside was desolate. Some 40 kids sat on two aluminum bleachers on either side of the ring, a ratio of three boys to every girl — mostly malformed, high school–shooter types. (There were lots of big black boots, long trench coats, and T-shirts for the masked metal band Slipknot.) One goth girl wore a Phantom of the Opera T-shirt. Mixed in were some Latino kids, cholos dressed in quasi-gangster uniforms — white wifebeaters, clean blue jeans and shaved heads. One of them had the letters "O.C.," for Orange County, tattooed at the base of his skull beneath a close-cropped bit of stubble. Here were all the makings of Nirvana's classic "Smells Like Teen Spirit" video. "Some live in nice neighborhoods," Eric said of the crowd, "some don't live in nice neighborhoods."

When “the talent” arrived, they outnumbered the audience. They were dressed as amboyantly as a person could be by stocking up on gear at Wal-Mart, Hot Topic and the local costume shop. A short but highly de ned Asian boy with cocky ’tude walked around shirtless, his wavy black hair brushing at his ankles. A white teenager named J.J. looked like a landlocked surfer in a blue Billabong pullover, khaki jams and suede black sneakers. He seemed incongruous, as if he’d walked o a South Bay beach and ended up in East L.A. Chris Jackson arrived not in the guise of Mr. Fantastic, but wearing a hooded Baja pullover on top of street clothes. He sat down quietly on the bleachers.

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A wrestler named Kevin a.k.a. Black Eagle walked into the rink with his own teenage camera crew in tow. “It was more fun in the old days,” Eric told me. “There were no egos back then.”

The eight matches on the bill followed in not-so-rapid succession — Aztec Warrior vs. Dale Havoc, Shadow vs. Badd Blood, then Silver Tyger vs. Pinoy Boy (“Pinoy” being slang for Filipinos residing in the U.S.). Each match was punctuated by a 15-minute intermission to prepare the ring. Some of the kids used impressive moves drawn from lucha libre, Mexico’s highly acrobatic style of professional wrestling, but much of the evening seemed interminable. The kids would enter the ring to heavy metal, preen a bit, then chase each other around, delivering fake blows accompanied by stomping feet or loud, open-handed slaps across the face. If they got in a high spot (a ashy maneuver that people like), they’d draw either heel heat (booing) or face heat (cheering), depending on how sympathetic the character was to the crowd.

More impressive were the audience’s running footnotes — satiric, culturally jaded and tinged with hints of ethnic tension. “Meh-hi-co! Meh-hi-co!” they cheered for Aztec Warrior. “Eat him like a bean burrito!” At one point, a wrestler named Mr. California was bludgeoned by a vintage computer keyboard until a rivulet of blood crept from behind his ear. “Hey, I coulda used that!” someone yelled. “Don’t worry,” another joked, “it wasn’t Windows XP compatible.”

For most of the evening, Chris seemed unusually quiet. In our previous meeting, one-on-one, he was a self-aware, hyperarticulate and wildly funny kid, albeit one wrapped in intense defense mechanisms — putting his wrestling persona before his real one. But sitting there amid the kids on the bleachers, he simply blended into the crowd. As we got closer to the evening’s headline match, he livened up a bit, commenting on the referee, a guy who sometimes wrestles under the name Big Daddy Swing.

“He sucks as a ref and a wrestler,” said Chris. “He’s too fat. Once he wanted to do this move where he bends me over and gets behind me, and I was like, ‘Hey, Big Daddy Swing, I don’t swing that way.’”

The main match featured Paul Aguirre a.k.a. Xsanity versus a preppy-looking Latino kid called Schizo. “It’s Aaron ‰ Carter!” one fan screamed as Schizo entered the ring. Eric told me that a lot of the kids have their hopes pinned on Aguirre. He is lanky, strong and athletic. To use some wrestling lingo, he knows how to take his bumps (particularly

climactic falls) and he is able to get over (really connect to the crowd). Aguirre drove to tonight's match in a brand-new In niti Q45, and rumor has it the car belongs to his 35-year-old sugar mama. Everyone thinks he's going to make it into a real fed one day, probably as a "jobber," a journeyman wrestler who breaks into the business by losing to more famous wrestlers and making his opponents look good. Still, he has a chance of wrestling for real. For real.

At one point in the match, Schizo knocked Xsanity out of the ring with a metal chair and tried to nish him o with a back ip. But Xsanity shifted and Schizo crashed hard into the concrete. A minute later, hundreds of thumbtacks were strewn onto the oor and the two of them rolled around in the mess of spikes until Schizo bulldogged Xsanity into the tacks. (Bulldogging: to put your opponent into a headlock and ram his head into the ground.)

And then it became clear that the match up to this point had been a prelude to the real action: As Xsanity pulled a thumbtack from his head, Chris stood up, cocked his head, removed a pair of sunglasses from his pullover pouch and suavely slid them on. A smile spread wide across his face. He removed the pullover, and there, in black vinyl shorts, black-and-white-striped soccer socks and a pair of Pokémon sneakers, stood Mr. Fantastic.

"Look, it's a twig," said someone in the audience.

Undeterred, Mr. Fantastic shot toward the ring, jumped onto the apron and spat in Schizo's face, providing just enough of a distraction for Xsanity to lay his nishing move, a complicated twisting headlock maneuver that appeared to (but didn't) break Schizo's neck. Xsanity and Mr. Fantastic then exited the ring to cheers and jeers. That's when the ref counted Xsanity out, giving Schizo an unjust win and setting the stage for the next match. Whether scripted this way, or whether they simply couldn't wait for the next match, I don't know, but Mr. Fantastic and Xsanity then proceeded to re-enter the ring and beat up both Schizo and the ref.

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Mr. Fantastic was, well, pretty fantastic. When I talked to Chris about the match later, he said, "Make sure you print this: 'I brought new meaning to the word bitch slap as I gave Schizo ve across the eye.'"

MR. FANTASTIC'S BIG HEAF

More than most backyarders, Chris has a big heart. Metaphorically speaking, of course, he loves the things he loves with a passionate, hypergeek intensity. Literally speaking, Chris' heart is enlarged due to a medical condition. He claims not to know the name for it exactly, though he says the term has more letters in it than the alphabet. As a child, Chris had to take growth hormones to get him up to 5 feet tall and 90 pounds.

"What other e ects does the condition have on you?" I asked.

“It kills me,” he answered, deadpan.

“Oh,” I said.

“You’re not going to put that in there, are you?”

“C’mon, it makes your story poignant. Don’t you want Tobey Maguire to play you in the TV Movie of the Week?”

“I want to play myself.”

He’s not kidding. On one of my visits, Chris pointed out the Grove Theater in Upland’s two-block-long downtown, the sort of contribution that makes up the cultural bedrock of a place like this. It’s owned by Bill Kinison (brother of the late comic Sam) and his wife, Sherry, who discovered Chris in one of Upland High School’s drama-club productions. They were impressed — mostly due to the fact that he was an 18-year-old who could pass for 12 — and agented him for a while. Chris recalled his closest brush with success, a callback for a national commercial. He and his mother drove to Los Angeles for the nal round of auditions, but got stuck in tra c and missed it. They took this as a sign that he wasn’t meant for the screen trade.

More recently, Chris met with the famed art photographer Larry Clark, director of Kids and Bully, controversial lms that chronicle sex, drugs and violence in the lives of contemporary teenagers. Clark’s casting director was interested in putting him in his new lm, Ken Park. They o ered him $1,000 a week for four weeks of work, but he had doubts about the role.

“My feelings were mixed,” Chris said. “He wanted part of my balls to be showing, and I was supposed to get molested in the lm. But later on, I would get straddled by a girl and get to feel her up. It was a tossup.” Finally he decided against taking the part, rejecting the $4,000 payday. “As far as Larry Clark is concerned,” he said, “I want to expose my talent, not my testicles.”

For a brief time after high school, Chris attended the Summit Career College in Colton, studying video editing and graphic design. He eventually dropped out and since then has held a series of minimum-wage jobs, including his dream gig at the Pro Wrestling Shop, which has since gone out of business. He currently works at the photo counter of a Walgreens in San Bernardino.

RETIREMEN-

A couple of months ago, I met Chris at the Frank & Sons collectible show in the City of Industry, where vendors sold Rawhide Kidcomic books, sci- memorabilia, Yu-Gi-Oh! cards and Kobe Bryant bobble-head dolls. Clustered around two dozen faux-wood picnic tables sat the real geeks, a covey of kids in thick glasses who rolled 20-sided dice and opened fresh packs of Magic: The Gathering cards. One hundred feet away, behind a curtain, a ring was set up for an event sponsored by Revolution Pro, a small local fed. Chris greeted me looking like a member of a nü-metal band, his hair knotted into three dozen small braids.

The contenders in this afternoon's matches were older-looking, though former backyarders such as Andre Verdun and Scorpio Sky were also on the bill. Chris requested that I not mention them by name. As they wend their way through the pro ranks, they're trying to put some distance between themselves and their backyard pasts. A wrestler named Street Style entered the ring, Eminem's "Lose Yourself" playing over the PA.

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Look, if you had one shot, one opportunity
To seize everything you ever wanted in one moment
Would you capture it or just let it slip?

Chris sat on the sidelines in a T-shirt emblazoned with one of Revolution Pro's slogans: "You can kill a revolutionary but you can never kill a revolution."

His palms are sweaty, knees weak,
arms are heavy
There's vomit on his sweater already,
mom's spaghetti
He's nervous, but on the surface he
looks calm and ready

Chris brought abstractly comic signs to cheer on the locals: "Gallinero is Pete Rose"; "Quicksilver is the best thing since confetti." He verbally taunted each of the wrestlers as they entered the ring. "You're a real meanie," he said to Andre Verdun, currently wrestling with Revolution Pro as Lonestar. Andre was not so gentle, grabbing and hurling Chris back into his chair — winks exchanged, smiles on both of their faces.

You better lose yourself in the music,
the moment
You own it, you better never let it go
You only get one shot, do not miss your
chance to blow

This opportunity comes once in a lifetime yo

Since the height of the backyard days, Chris hasn't wrestled much. I ask him if he's retired yet. He looked at me as if I were nuts. "I'm just waiting for someone to book me!" If that doesn't happen, and it probably won't, Chris has just one regret about his career in the squared circle: "When you tell people you wrestle, they assume you wear tights."

THE END

"It's the one and only Mr. Fantastic here," went the message. "I'm at the body shop getting my car worked on, and I was looking at one of the magazines I had. It had that Avril Lavigne in it. That really hot chick that wears the tie. The skater girl."

You might know the storybook ending to Lavigne's life: She began singing gospel and country music in church and at state fairs in her native Ontario, then switched to a more mainstream pop style when she moved to Los Angeles. The hits started coming when Lavigne assumed the identity of a punky, suburban everygirl. Real life doesn't work like that.

Chris' message continued: "I was thinking, 'Dude, I gotta call Alec so he can get that piece about me out so that chick can nd out I want her bad. And she can fall in love with me when she meets me and yadda yadda yadda.' Life goes on, right? And happily ever after . . . Something like that."

Yes, Mr. Fantastic, something like that.

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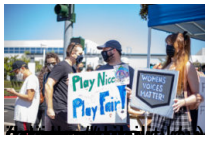
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